



**Joseph Alsop**

# New Soviet Orbital Weapon Could Be U.S. City-Destroyer

THERE WAS a lot of food for thought in Secretary of Defense McNamara's cool announcement that the Soviets were building something exquisitely entitled, in the best Pentagonese, a "Fractional Orbiting Bombardment System," alias FOBS.

To begin with, the response to the announcement quite astonishingly demonstrated the extraordinary double standard (or one might say, the highly developed practice of double-think) that prevails in this country today. Here were the Soviets, after all, going at least halfway towards breaking their promise to put no bombs in outer space.

But was there the kind of chorus of outrage about wicked people stepping up the arms race, that greeted the announcement of America's "thin" deployment of anti-ballistic missiles? Why of course not! And was the miracle of detective-intelligence behind the McNamara announcement greeted with a chorus of praise, to balance the constant attacks on our intelligence services? Why of course not!

Those who ask such silly questions probably ought to go stand in a corner, in fact. Meanwhile the real story of FOBS, which hardly came through in McNamara's characteristic Rand-style presentation, is also immensely interesting and instructive.

The thing itself is simply an ICBM made into a low orbit satellite, which is built to hurl a warhead at a chosen target from a pre-set point on the orbit round the globe. The first question concerning it is whether the orbit really will be "fractional." If so, the agreement not to put bombs in full orbit has not been truly violated, even if the spirit of that agreement has been a bit bruised.

THE ANSWER is that the intelligence is complete enough so that the word "fractional" represents no mere hopeful assumption. That being the hard evidence, however, why on earth have the Soviets bothered to develop this much more expensive and less efficient kind of satellite-ICBM? For FOBS carries less warhead and has a much bigger margin of target error than a normal ICBM.

As such, FOBS cannot be relied on to attack hardened targets. It will only be useful to attack

strategic airfields (presuming the airplanes are not airborne already) or other soft targets like cities. The possibility that it is really an anti-city weapon was not pointed out by the Defense Secretary, but it exists, quite clearly. Even so, why did the Soviets go to the extra bother and expense when they already have very good ICBMs?

Here, the answer is curious indeed. The Soviets evidently expected the United States to install a full anti-ballistic missile system, instead of the much attacked "thin" system that is being installed (which will give no defense against Soviet missiles, but will offer protection from Chinese lunacy).

The proof of this Soviet expectation is simple. The only advantages of FOBS derive from the low orbit. This makes FOBS immune to detection of take-off by the existing Soviet and American long-range radar systems, and it also makes FOBS immune to interception by ABMs of the Soviet type.

It is not immune to interception by the "Sprint" element of the American ABM, but this would only happen very close to home. More important, FOBS will not be immune to detection at take-off, or very soon after take-off, by the new American "over-the-horizon" radar system.

THIS NEW SYSTEM is already being installed to supplement the existing BMEWS radars. In a few months, when installation of the "over-the-horizon" radars will be completed, FOBS will therefore lose its main advantage—the shortness of warning of attack.

Hence FOBS is not a disturbing development, except in the sense that it strongly underlines the Soviet determination to go forward with the arms race. The United States is denounced for being determined not to lose that race, but if there is one, losing is always the greatest danger. And this leads, in turn, to the final question raised by FOBS, which concerns the peculiar micrometry of doom practiced in the McNamara Pentagon to measure adequacy of deterrence.

The point is that a deterrent is never as good as you think it is. A deterrent, in truth, is only as good as the other side thinks it is. And no deterrent will deter if the other side miscalculates. The deterrent itself, or by over-

estimating the strength of their defense against the deterrent.

In the McNamara Pentagon, to be sure, forecasts of Soviet weapons development have been remarkably accurate, on balance; and in the McNamara Pentagon, above all, U.S. planning is based on the ever-present possibility that the Soviets will exceed the forecasts.

Yet this strange FOBS underlines, once again, a really crucial fact. The Soviets do not do their defense planning, measure weapons like their ABM, or use the kind of defense analysis that McNamara does. So a potential Soviet miscalculation must always be guarded against.